

Wilford, John Noble. "Discovering Columbus," New York Times Magazine, 11 August 1991, pp. 25ff.

Wilford's article is an excellent statement of history's constructions of heroes. Heroes are made by posterity and for its reasons. It matters little that history has little information on which to build its myths; the myths get built out of the stuff historians want included. In an era of great piety, Columbus was made into a saint and his canonization was promoted by the Irish and the French; in an age of rugged individualism, he was made over into a man who never took no for an answer. In the case of Columbus, we have now had 500 years to make him into our image of Columbus; and the lack of information on him has been in the main a good thing: historians could fabricate without fear of being contradicted.

In the early 16th century, little attention was paid to Columbus. But that was soon to change: "By the middle of the 16th century, Columbus began to emerge from the shadows, reincarnated not so much as a man and historical figure but as a myth and symbol. In 1552, in a ringing assessment that would be repeated time and again, the historian Francisco Lopen de Gomara wrote, 'The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it) is the discovery of the Indies.' Columbus came to epitomize the explorer and discoverer, the man of vision and audacity, the hero who overcame opposition and adversity to change history. "By the end of the 16th century, English explorers and writers acknowledged his primacy and inspiration. 'Had they not Columbus to stire them up,' Richard Hakluyt, the historian of exploration, wrote in 1598. He was celebrated in poetry and plays, especially by the Italians. Even Spain was coming around. In 1614, a popular play, 'El Nuevo Mondo descubierto por Cristobal Colon,' portrayed Columbus as a dreamer up against the stolid forces of entrenched tradition, a man of singular purpose who triumphed, the embodiment of that spirit driving humans to explore and discover. "The association between Columbus and America prospered in

the 18th century, as the population became increasingly American-born, with less reason to identify with the 'mother country.' No one in Boston or New York is recorded to have celebrated Columbus on the bicentennial, in 1692. But within a very short time, the colonists began thinking of themselves as a people distinct from the English. By virtue of their isolation and common experience in a new land, they were becoming Americans, and they looked to define themselves on their own terms and through their own symbols. Samuel Sewall of Boston was one of the first to suggest their land should rightfully be named for Columbus, 'the magnanimous hero...who was manifestly appointed of God to be the Finder of these lands.'... "By the time of the Revolution, Columbus had been transmuted into a national icon, a hero second only to Washington. The new Republic's celebration of Columbus reached a climax in October 1792, the 300th anniversary of the landfall. By then, King's College in New York had been renamed Columbia and the national capital being planned was given the name the District of Columbia, perhaps to appease those who demanded that the entire country be designated Columbia. "It is not hard to understand the appeal of Columbus as a totem for the former subjects of George III. Columbus had found the way of escape from Old World tyranny. He was the solitary individual who challenged the unknown sea, as triumphant Americans contemplated the dangers and promise of their own wilderness frontier. He had been opposed by kings and (in his mind) betrayed by royal perfidy. But as a consequence of his vision and audacity, there was now a land free from kings, a vast continent for new beginnings. "In Columbus, the new nation found a hero seemingly free of any taint from association with the European colonial powers. The Columbus symbolism gave Americans an instant mythology and unique place in history, and their adoption of Columbus magnified his own place." (pp. 28 and 45)

"The historian Daniel J. Borstin observes that people 'once felt themselves made by their heroes' and cites James Russell Lowell: 'The idol is the measure of the worshiper.' Accordingly, writers and orators of the 19th century ascribed to Columbus all the human virtues that were most prized

in that time of geographic and industrial expansion, heady optimism and an unquestioning belief in progress as the dynamic of history." (p. 45)

Modernity has changed things. Columbus has come to be viewed today in terms of the views taken by Native Americans. "Once again, Columbus has become a symbols, this time of exploitation and imperialism. It is time that the encounter be viewed not only from the European standpoint, but from that of the indigenous Americans. It is time that the sanitized storybook version of Europeans bringing civilization and Christianity to America be replaced with a more clear-eyed recognition of the evils and atrocities committed in wresting a land from its original inhabitants." (p. 49)

"...(T)he only example Columbus set was one of pettiness, self-aggrandizement and a lack of magnanimity. He could not find in himself the generosity to share any credit for his accomplishments. Whatever his original objective, his lust for gold drove him from island to island and, it seems, to the verge of paranoia." (p. 55)

"It would be interesting to know how Columbus will be characterized in 2092. For it seems that his destiny is to serve as a barometer of our self-confidence and complacency, our hopes and aspirations, our faith in progress and the capacity of humans to create a more just society." (p. 55)

In all of this, Wilford has beautifully exemplified the deconstructionist approach to an examination of symbols. He makes the point that heroes are our heroes, they possess the qualities we, not necessarily they, wanted to be. We ascribe to them the qualities we define as great and turn them, thereby, into myths, personalities to reference as if they imaged the traits ascribed to them.

As with Columbus, there are other heroes in science who have been made into myths. Isaac Newton, not the man but the myth, is the genius, the innovator, the great mathematician, the nonpareil symbol of science not because of what he was himself but because his own generation needed him as a rationalizer of the Glorious Revolution and the herald of the new era of a predictable universe. The "case study" of the mythologizing of Columbus is a laudable one for many purposes.

It is noted that this article is adapted from "The Mysterious History of Columbus which is to be published by Alfred A. Knopf in October.

Finally, there are numerous portraits of Columbus, painted by various people down through the centuries, which are printed here. Portraits through the years similarly reflect the values of the age in which they are painted. That "art form," like history, concretizes its images mythically also. Fascinating to compare the various pictures.